Courting controversy - the Lindow Man exhibition at the Manchester Museum

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Abstract

The discovery of the well-preserved body of a 2,000 year old man at Lindow Moss near Wilmslow, Manchester, UK, in 1984 provided archaeologists and forensic scientists with a veritable time capsule of evidence concerning life during the late Iron Age and early Roman period. Not only was the body of considerable antiquity, but the forensic examination established that the man had suffered a violent death. He had been hit on the head, apparently garrotted and had his throat cut (the so-called 'Triple Death') in what appears to have been a ritual sacrifice to the gods. Exhibitions about Lindow Man, as the body came to be known, were held at the Manchester Museum in 1987 and 1991 to widespread acclaim. This article discusses the approach taken by the museum in its most recent exhibition about Lindow Man (April 2008-April 2009) which proved to be unexpectedly controversial. Acknowledging alternative interpretations of Lindow Man's death, and changing attitudes towards human remains in society, the Museum adopted a polyvocal approach to the exhibition. Eight specially-selected contributors shared their personal thoughts and theories about the dead man. These included a forensic scientist, peat diggers involved in the discovery, a landscape archaeologist, a member of the local community, a Pagan and museum curators from both the British Museum and the Manchester Museum. Personal items belonging to each of the contributors appeared alongside more conventional museum exhibits in order to explore the different meanings that Lindow Man has for different people. The design of the exhibition was also challenging and made innovative use of MDF. Public response to the exhibition was mixed, though still broadly favorable. Thousand of visitors' comments cards collected during the course of the exhibition provide a rich resource for future study of the public response to the debate about human remains in museums.

Discovery and interpretation

When the remains of an adult human male body were discovered during commercial peat extraction at Lindow Moss, near Manchester, during the summer of 1984, the police became involved in case they were linked to the disappearance of a local woman. After preliminary radiocarbon dating indicated that the remains were indeed ancient, Lindow Man, as the body became known, underwent painstaking archaeological investigation and forensic examination by a team of archaeologists and scientists led by Dr Ian Stead at the British Museum (STEAD, BOURKE & BROTHWELL 1986; STEAD & Turner 1987). The man had died violently, from blows to the head, perhaps being garrotted and having his throat cut. This classic pioneering study could not answer all of the questions definitively and there has been protracted debate ever since amongst archaeologists, anatomists, anthropologists and others about how, why and when he died (CONNOLLY 1985; TURNER & SCAIFE 1995). Subsequent work seems to show that Lindow Man dates from the late 1st century AD or early Roman period in the North of Britain (GOWLETT, HEDGES & LAW 1989). More recently, the debate has embraced the ethics of displaying human remains in museums (e.g. VASWANI 2001; RANDERSON 2007).

The Manchester Museum exhibition

The Manchester Museum's exhibition *Lindow Man a Bog Body Mystery* (19th April 2008 – 19th April 2009) drew upon research carried out over the last 25 years and explored the different meanings that Lindow Man's body holds for different people. This was not the first time that Lindow Man had been displayed at the Manchester Museum. Earlier exhibitions in 1987 and 1991 explored Lindow Man's life and times and presented the results of the latest forensic work. Much had changed in the meantime,

however; human remains had become more contentious, partly because of the Alder Hey scandal, in which it emerged that organs had been removed by hospitals from hundreds of deceased children without the families' permission (BUTLER 2001); and partly because of the repatriation of human remains to indigenous communities in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas (FFORDE 2004). Old orthodoxies had been questioned and new interpretations proposed (TAYLOR 2002; HILL 2004; HUTTON 2004). For example, archaeologists were less confident that Lindow Man suffered a 'triple death' as the trio of fatal wounds discovered during the forensic examination of the body became known. New approaches emphasized the importance of place, in particular, the liminal nature of peat bogs (GILES 2006) and René Girard's sacrificial theory was applied to Lindow Man (GIRARD 1972). The debate has not been conducted solely within the archaeological and curatorial professions. Increasingly the voices of marginalized groups such as pagans, whose relationship with the dead is based on spirituality and a respect for the ancestors, were also making themselves heard (RESTALL ORR & BIENKOWSKI 2006).

When it accepted the offer of the British Museum to lend the body of Lindow Man for a year, the Manchester Museum was anxious to take account not only of changing academic interpretations of the discovery but also of increasing sensitivity towards human remains within society more generally. This was reflected in the most recent exhibition, which featured the personal testimony of a forensic scientist, a landscape archaeologist, two museum curators, a former peat worker, someone from the Lindow community and a Pagan. Each speaker's testimony was supported by written and audio extracts from interviews, personal items that demonstrated the nature of that person's association with Lindow Man and exhibits drawn from both the British Museum and the Manchester Museum collections. Alongside a selection of some of the finest Iron Age artefacts from the British Museum collection were displayed laboratory equipment used in the study of an ancient body, spades used to dig up peat, personal memorabilia about the unsuccessful Lindow Man repatriation campaign of the 1980s, a wand used in a pagan ceremony and even a child's toy Care Bear.

Public response

In presenting Lindow Man's story, or rather stories, from different points of view the Manchester Museum was implementing the findings of a public consultation held in February 2007. Following the opening of the exhibition in April 2008, however, there was a vitriolic response from certain Manchester websites and comments from the public were mixed. Some visitors were baffled by the polyvocal approach; others were affronted by the innovative design. Some questioned the justification for including the voice of a pagan alongside that of a forensic scientist; others the inclusion of a Care Bear. Although some visitors criticized the apparent lack of factual detail, in fact there was a great deal of information in extracts from recorded interviews with the contributors. Some of the insights that sprang from the Lindow Man exhibition, such as the link between the deposition of high status votive objects and human bodies in water, depended on visitors engaging with a variety of senses (visual, oral and tactile) and in this way potentially making new meanings for themselves.

Despite criticism, it is clear from the thousands of comments cards left by visitors that the Museum achieved its aim of stimulating wider public debate about human remains in museums, even if in retrospect Lindow Man might have been displayed more sensitively. The body was deliberately divorced from any interpretation; visitors had to make up their own minds from the information available in the exhibition. The Museum was careful to avoid suggesting that any one interpretation was to be seen as authoritative.

The inclusion of an offerings box in the exhibition, allowing the public to show their respect for Lindow Man, was also criticized, even though visitors to Christian religious sites often light a candle as a mark of respect, irrespective of their personal religious beliefs. A fascinating collection of personal offerings accumulated during the exhibition and is currently being assessed following the end of the exhibition.

This, it is believed, represents one of the first instances of the formal study of this type of ephemeral material. The thousands of comments cards also offer a rich archive for future research.

More detailed visitor survey suggests that some of the fiercest criticism of the exhibition came from more conservative museum goers, whose expectations of an authoritative and straightforward presentation of Iron Age life were disappointed by the polyvocal approach and the innovative design (BROWN 2009). Whilst everyone involved in the project wanted to do something different from the exhibitions of 1987 or 1991, the Museum recognized that some visitors struggled with the exhibition and put in place measures to help them by training Visitor Services Assistants to answer questions and provide more detailed information if required.

Some conclusions

This was not an 'easy' exhibition and the Museum learnt some important lessons: the importance of public consultation was confirmed; the need to review the design as part of the development process; and the fact that university museums have an important role to play in presenting novel and potentially controversial work that would be difficult for a different venue such as a local authority museum. Although the approach that was taken was not to every visitor's taste, academic response was broadly favorable (BURCH 2008; JAMES 2008; REES LEAHY 2008; RESTALL ORR 2008) and the exhibition won the 2009 Design Week Award for best temporary exhibition.[1] At the very least, the three exhibitions held at the Manchester Museum about Lindow Man provide a fascinating case study of changing interpretations of the body since its discovery in 1984 and of changing curatorial practice over the last 25 years.

Acknowledgements

The writer wishes to thank Piotr Bienkowski, Pete Brown, Melanie Giles and Nick Merriman for commenting on this paper. Any errors are the responsibility of the writer.

The Lindow Man exhibition was made possible through the generous support of The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Wellcome Trust, Renaissance in the Regions, The Foyle Foundation, The Dorset Foundation and the Northwest Regional Development Agency. The Manchester Museum expresses its deepest gratitude to the British Museum for lending Lindow Man to the Manchester Museum for the third time since his discovery.

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